DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 219 764 CS 207 083

AUTHOR Smith, James R.; Carroll, Raymond L.
TITLE Exploring Audience Preferences for Hour Network Nightly News.
PUB DATE Jul 82
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (65th, Athens, OH, July 25-28, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitudes; Audiences; Interest Research; News Media; *News Reporting; *Programing (Broadcast); *Television Research; *Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS *Audience Analysis; *Media Use

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine the extent of television viewer interest in watching a 60-minute network evening newscast each weeknight. Data were collected through telephone interviews with 203 residents of a single county served primarily by New York City stations. Respondents reported their viewing of network nightly news programs, the number of news magazine programs watched during an average month, and whether they watched a local newscast before they viewed a network news program. Demographic data were also gathered. Subjects were then asked whether they would watch network news programs more often if they were expanded to an hour, when they would prefer to watch them, and what kind of news they would like to see on such programs. The results indicated that just over half of the respondents said they would be likely to watch network news programs more often if they were expanded to an hour, 35% indicated they would not increase their news viewing, and the remainder were uncertain. Most respondents (75%) preferred the programs expanded in their present early evening time slot, while only 10% preferred a 10 to 11 p.m. news program. The strongest preferences for news content were investigative reporting and higher quality, in-depth reporting of news events. Those respondents classified as heavy news watchers ("news addicts") were not necessarily the most likely to prefer a longer newscast. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED219764

EXPLORING AUDIENCE PREFERENCES FOR HOUR NETWORK NIGHTLY NEWS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

by

James R. Smith
Assistant Professor, R/TV
Speech Communication
State University of New York
New Paltz, NY 12561

and

Raymond L. Carroll
Associate Professor, Broadcast and Film
School of Communication
The University of Alabama
University, AL 35486

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

JAmes R. Smith
Raymond L. Carroll

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Presented at the Annual Convention of the Association for Education in Journalism, Radio-TV Journalism Division, Athens, Ohio, July 27, 1982.

CS207888

EXPLORING AUDIENCE PREFERENCES FOR HOUR NETWORK NIGHTLY NEWS

During the past few years we have witnessed a considerable increase in network news services. Two 24-hour cable network news organizations, Cable News Network and Satellite News Channels, are in operation. Independent Network News was formed to provide nightly service to independent television stations. The ABC television network has received affiliate and audience acceptance for its late night program, Nightline, and CBS has uncovered plans to offer affiliates news programming between two and five a.m. Similarly, NBC recently inaugurated its late hour news program, Overnight, and all the networks have expanded their present early morning news programs.[1] These developments provide viewers with greater news service than ever before; but this paper explores audience preferences regarding the last major network news objective: expansion of nightly network news programs from 30 to 60 minutes.

While there have been talent and format changes, the last major expansion in network evening news came during the 1960s when the programs were stretched from 15 to 30 minutes.[2] At that time, network officials stressed the need for more time to effectively report national and international events. Since the network news divisions were not considered sources of profit, the action and rationale seemed particularly journalistic. The more recent expansion overtures, beginning in about 1976, have occurred in a much different environment.

The financial situation for news has improved greatly,[3] even though the reasons offered by the networks for expanding their nightly news programs remain quite similar to those used in the 1960s.[4] Local news operations have been doing their own expanding; in some cases, local news consumes two hours during the four to eight p.m. local station time period. Thus, the scheduling of a longer network nightly news program has economic and programming implications for network affiliates. Currently, the network nightly news feeds are bracketed by profitable local news or other access time programs on one side and

similarly lucrative prime time, dominated by the network entertainment divisions, on the other. Outgoing CBS News President William Leonard summarized the network position succinctly when he said:

> What's disappointing to me is that many stations, particularly many larger stations, and their managements, see what we perceive as putting our best foot forward as being antithetical to their interest. In some cases, they question our motives. We are in danger of being further apart rather than where we should be, and that is, closer together.[5]

There are alternatives to expanding the nightly network news programs during their existing time slot. Audience ratings for prime time news magazine programs and other network news broadcasts have demonstrated audience appetite for news at other times. But a question that has not been addressed in previous research is when viewers would prefer to view expanded nightly network news programs.

Yet another question concerns what nightly network news programs should do differently if expanded beyond their present 30 minute length. Network news leaders seem almost unanimous in their desire to increase both the variety of stories and the coverage of important national and international news items.[6] The apparent wisdom of such a policy is supported by a study of viewer preferences that concluded that light and moderate viewers might watch more network news if in-depth coverage, story variety and news that directly affects the average viewer were increased.[7] If additional network news program time were made available, we wondered what kind of content the audience would prefer. A related questionwas what kind of audience would most likely watch expanded network nightly news? Stevenson and White concluded that while the audience for network news programs is large, only 18 percent of the adult population watched with regularity and only 13 percent paid full attention to network news on the average weekday.[8] Would the news "addicts" form the core audience for

expanded news or would a longer nightly news program induce a greater number of moderate and light viewers to become more regular members of the audience?[9]

Further, what of the role of local news program attendance? Would regular viewing of these programs, which generally precede the network nightly news, affect viewing of longer network news programs?

To investigate these questions, we conducted an exploratory survey to determine the extent of viewer interest in watching a 60-minute network evening newscast each weeknight; audience preferences for air times for such programs; the types of news content viewers might desire in expanded network nightly news, and how we might describe potential viewers of such programs.

Method

As part of a larger study, data were collected late in 1980 through telephone interviews with 203 residents of Dutchess County, New York (an area serviced primarily by New York City stations airing 1.5 or more hours of local news each day). Respondents reported their viewing of network nightly news programs, the number of news magazine programs (e.g., 60 Minutes, 20/20) watched during an average month and whether they watched a local newscast before they viewed a network nightly news program. Additionally, we gathered such demographic data as subject age, sex and educational level.

To determine interest in longer network news programs, we employed a five-point "agree-disagree" index to quantify subjects' responses to the statement, "If network news was expanded to a full hour each night I would watch it more." We also asked subjects when they would prefer to watch an hour-long newscast. Finally, to determine the kinds of content respondents would desire given longer network nightly news programs, we included an open-ended question, "If network news was expanded, what would you like to see more of?"

Results

Over half the respondents (54%) said they would be likely to watch network nightly news more often if it were expanded to 60 minutes, while 35 percent indicated they would not increase their news viewing. The remainder (11%) were uncertain. Most respondents (75%) said they preferred a nightly network news program expanded in the present time period--a response that may have been motivated by habituation to watching the present network news programs at a given time. A considerably smaller but reasonable proportion (10%) indicated a preference for a 10-11 p.m. news program. Six percent of our respondents preferred the late night period (11:30 p.m. or later), while eight percent preferred earlier prime time hours (8-9 or 9-10 p.m.). Hence, it would seem that the present audience routine prevailed among most respondents in their preferrence for expanding network nightly news in its present time slot.

Our third question pertained to the content desired in an expanded nightly news program. These results, shown in Table 1, basically support the judgments of network news officials, noted earlier. The two strongest preferences were for investigative reporting and higher quality, in-depth reporting of news events. We note, however, that the third highest preference was for feature stories. While other preferences ranked considerably lower, "News variety," "commentaries" and "news that affects me" did place slightly above preferences reported for other content attributes or subjects such as "truth in news," "international coverage," "political news" and "economic news."

Table 1 About Here

To determine who would prefer what content in an expanded network news program, we classified respondents by their indication of high, medium or low interest in attending longer news broadcasts. If we can assume that present viewing habits and experiences influenced responses to our questions, it is

instructive to note the kinds of content that might attract those indicating little likelihood of attending expanded news programs as a way to contrast with the problem of maintaining viewers who would probably watch whether changes were made in the content or not.

Respondents indicating the least likelihood of watching longer news programs reported the strongest interest in better quality news and in-depth news. They also preferred more investigative reporting than other respondents. According to our cross-tabulations, the most apparent difference between those most likely to watch and the other respondents was a preference for more topical or "hard" news. Not surprisingly, the least likely viewers were in the group that watched the fewest daily news programs and weekly news magazine programs, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 About Here

The data in Table 2 suggest that heavy news watchers (the news "addicts") are not necessarily those most likely to attend longer network evening newscasts. The medium respondents had the heaviest attendance in all categories of news and informational programs; however, these respondents also preferred more feature stories in longer newscasts. Since they are the heaviest viewers of "info-tainment" programs (e.g., That's Incredible and Real People), it appears that heavy news viewers will not watch longer offerings; on the other hand, it does suggest the locus of audience growth which, unfortunately for some journalists, may not be hinged on increased coverage of "hard" news items.

A number of statistical analyses were performed to further define potential viewer typologies. There was a low, although positive, correlation between interest in longer network evening news programs and the number of nightly network newscasts currently viewed ($r = .142$. $p = .023$). We observed a similar relationship between interest in longer nightly news programs and the number of

news magazine programs viewed during an average month ($r = .177$, $p = .008$). These are statistically significant relationships; yet, little varience was accounted for by reported news viewing levels, which suggests that this is not a strong predictor of audience attendance to longer network news programs.

Analysis of variance tests were also performed on a number of viewing and demographic variables. Whether the subject watched a local newscast prior to the network news had little relationship with interest in longer network programs ($F = .35$, $df = 1/201$, $p = .55$). This finding should be interpreted with caution since the network owned-and-operated stations in New York City offer little coverage of news pertaining to the "upstate" area.

The sex of potential viewers and interest in longer news only approached significance ($F = 3.08$, $df = 1/201$, $p = .81$), with females indicating stronger interest than males. Similarly, the educational level of respondents only approached significance ($F = 1.76$, $df = 1/201$, $p = .139$), with college graduates reporting less interest in longer news programs than respondents with less education. The lowest interest in attending longer news programs was found among subjects with a post-graduate education. No meaningful relationship was discovered between respondent age and interest in longer network nightly news viewing ($r = .086$, $p = .111$). These observations are particularly interesting since older viewers and those with more education are generally considered to be among the most regular consumers of network news.

Discussion

This exploratory analysis of viewer preferences for longer network evening newscasts shows that there is an interest in hour-long network news, particularly if expanded in its present time slot. We did, however, observe differences among those indicating more or less likelihood of watching longer news broadcasts, particularly regarding quality and variety in content. These

findings imply how a potentially successful hour-long network newscast could be produced. Our respondents' preferences indicate that the additional time might best be spent in providing greater depth of reportage of leading stories, more investigative reports and more features, to increase story variety.

One implication in our findings is the apparent weakness of demographic variables in explicating variance in viewer interest in attending longer news programs; Levy was similarly frustrated in his analysis of news-interview program audiences.[10] The lack of explanatory power in demographic variables lends credence to the reasoning of such researchers as Palmgreen, Wenner and Rayburn,[11] who suggest that differences in network news attendance might best be considered in terms of the gratifications sought and obtained by viewers. Thus, the evidence is that demographic variables do not, by themselves, hold much promise for explaining audience interest in longer news; still, the apparent interest in longer news among our less-educated respondents merits further probing.

It is also interesting to note that attendance to local news programs had little relationship with projected viewing of longer network news programs. This could be due to the lack of local station (New York City) coverage of news pertinent to the northern counties. This leads us to conclude that local news loyalty and judgment of quality should be considered more fully in future studies.

Preferences for specific content attributes in longer news programs appear to reinforce the judgments of network news executives and the attributes discovered by Smith, Davis and Danes.[12] While there is some consensus on the importance of in-depth coverage, investigative reports, greater variety of stories and the inclusion of more feature items, the explanation is still unclear. Further investigation should examine the relationships between longer news program attribute preferences and the viewing levels for network nightly news, news magazine and "info-tainment" programs (which treat "feature" stories in great detail). The notion of "investigative reporting" should also be probed. While

definition of this concept is not wholly subjective, the results prompt us to suggest the consideration of the implications of audience perception of investigative reports. Our sample was too limited to make confident generalizations; however, future research could deal with this question.

Notes

[1]For a summary of recent network news program expansion, see "New News in the News," Broadcasting, July 5, 1982, pp. 71-73.

[2]See Ted Nielsen, "A History of Network Television News," in American Broadcasting: A Source Book on the History of Radio and Television, eds. Lawrence W. Lichty and Malachi C. Topping (New York: Hastings House, 1975), pp. 421-428.

[3]Alan Pearce, "How the Networks Have Turned News Into Dollars," TV Guide, August 23, 1980, pp. 6-12.

[4]See "Odds Growing Longer on Longer News," Broadcasting, November 1, 1976, pp. 19-20; "Rather Serves Notice on Longer Evening News," Broadcasting, December 8, 1980, p. 30; Ron Powers, "Hour-Long Network Is: Necessary, Too Expensive, Imminent, All of the Above, None of the Above," TV Guide, August 22, 1981, pp. 5-8; "The Long, Hard and Still Uncertain Road to Expanded News," Broadcasting, November 23, 1981, pp. 30-31, and "ABC Affiliates Exploring Options for Longer News," Broadcasting, December 7, 1981, p. 38.

[5]"The Way We Were, and Should Be," Broadcasting, March 1, 1982, p. 90.

[6]For an overview of network news executives' attitudes and the problems of convincing affiliates of the benefits of expanded network news, see Marvin Barrett and Zachary Sklar, The Eye of the Storm (New York: Lippincott and Crowell, 1980), pp. 39-44.

[7]James Smith, Leslie Davis and Jeffery Danes, "Television News and Audience Viewing Intentions," a paper presented at the annual convention of the Association for Education in Journalism, East Lansing Michigan, August 10, 1981.

[8]Robert Stevenson and Kathryn White, "The Cumulative Audience of Network Television News," Journalism Quarterly, 57 (Autumn 1980): 477-481.

[9]The co-host of the MacNeil-Leher Report, Robert MacNeil, stated that "TV has created a nation of news junkies who tune in every night to get their fix on the world" in "The New Face of TV News," Time, February 25, 1980, p. 65.

[10]Mark Levy, "The Audience for Television News Interview Programs," Journal of Broadcasting, 22 (Summer 1978): 339-347.

[11]Phillip Palmgreen, Lawrence Wenner and J.D. Rayburn, "Gratification Discrepancies and News Program Choices," Communication Research, in press. See also, Phillip Palmgreen, Lawrence Wenner and J.D. Rayburn, "Relations Between Gratifications Sought and Obtained: A Study of Television News," Communication Research, 7 (April 1980): 161-192, and Mark Levy, "The Audience Experience With Television News," Journalism Monographs, 55 (April 1978).

[12]Smith, Davis and Danes, "Television News and Audience Viewing Intentions."

TABLE 1

VIEWER PREFERENCES FOR MORE COVERAGE IN HOUR NEWS

COVERAGE AREA	ALL 3 %	ALL 3 (n)	ABC %	ABC (n)	CBS %	CBS (n)	NBC %	NBC (n)
Investigative Reporting	28.1%	(57)	23.4%	(22)	29.7%	(19)	30.1%	(22)
In-Depth Coverage	26.1	(53)	23.4	(22)	29.7	(19)	28.8	(21)
Feature Stories	10.8	(22)	13.8	(13)	6.3	(4)	11.0	(8)
More News Variety	5.4	(11)	4.3	(4)	7.8	(5)	4.1	(3)
Commentaries	4.9	(10)	3.2	(3)	7.8	(5)	4.1	(3)
News That Affects Me	4.4	(9)	5.3	(5)	4.7	(3)	4.1	(3)
News About Average People	3.9	(8)	6.4	(6)	4.7	(3)	2.7	(2)
International Coverage	3.0	(6)	1.1	(1)	1.6	(1)	5.5	(4)
Political News	3.0	(6)	3.2	(3)	3.1	(2)	2.7	(2)
Economic News	2.5	(5)	3.2	(3)	3.1	(2)	1.4	(1)
Better Quality News	2.0	(4)	2.1	(2)	--	--	2.7	(2)
Truth in News	1.5	(3)	3.2	(3)	--	--	1.4	(1)
Less Crime Coverage	1.5	(3)	1.1	(1)	1.6	(1)	1.4	(1)
Sports	1.5	(3)	3.2	(3)	--	--	--	--
Weather	1.0	(2)	2.1	(2)	--	--	--	--
Follow-Up on Stories	0.5	(1)	1.1	(1)	--	--	--	--
TOTAL*	100%	(203)	100%	(94)	100%	(64)	100%	(73)

*Figures may not equal 100% due to rounding

TABLE 2

NEWS PROGRAM ATTENDANCE AND LIKELIHOOD OF WATCHING LONGER NETWORK NEWS

Figures show the average attendance to regularly scheduled evening news, network news magazine and information-entertainment programs reported by respondents classified by their indication of low, medium or high likelihood of watching a longer nightly network news program.

	Longer Network News Viewing Likelihood		
	Low	Medium	High
REPORTED VIEWING: NIGHTLY NEWS PROGRAMS			
Network Nightly News	4.17	5.59	4.60
ABC Nightline	.14	--	.11
Watch Local News	.65	.77	.72
SUBTOTAL	4.96	6.36	5.43
NEWS MAGAZINE PROGRAMS			
20/20 (ABC News)	1.29	2.14	1.73
60 Minutes (CBS News)	1.86	2.23	2.28
Prime Time (NBC News)	.33	.59	.72
SUBTOTAL	3.48	4.96	4.73
INFORMATION-ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMS			
That's Incredible	1.19	1.50	1.03
Real People	1.69	2.36	1.50
PM Magazine	.47	.86	.83
SUBTOTAL	3.35	4.72	3.36
TOTAL	11.79	16.04	13.52